

Between Jenin and Montefiore: Key Insights from the Attack in Tel Aviv

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The recent attack on Montefiore Street in Tel Aviv on Saturday August 5, 2023, mirrors the troubling series of incidents that have plagued Israel over the past year. An independent terrorist, a “lone wolf”, arrives without any difficulty to the heart of the State of Israel and carries out an attack, which raises many questions as would any attack of this type. While security forces continue their investigations—determining if this was the act of an isolated individual or a broader organization—preliminary observations can be drawn. This discussion will center on three pivotal aspects: the assailant’s link to the refugee camp in Jenin, the profile of such “lone wolf” attackers, and potential oversights that enabled the tragedy, which, had it not been for the intervention of an Israeli security patrol, could have resulted in even greater civilian casualties.

Over the past year, Jenin’s refugee camp has drawn significant attention due to the spate of unusual terrorist activities emanating from this densely populated enclave. While Operation “Home and Garden” aimed to target the entrenched terrorist networks within the camp, even agencies like Shin Bet and the IDF acknowledged that it wouldn’t be a panacea for the entrenched extremist activities there. Though the operation managed to debilitate the terrorist infrastructure and led to the detention or elimination of several terrorists, some evaded capture. Post-operation, the primary aspiration was for the Palestinian Authority to regain administrative control of the camp, thus preventing the resurgence of terrorist hubs. However, the speedy re-emergence of terrorist activities in the camp demonstrated the challenges the Palestinian Authority faced in asserting governance. Notably, the terrorist responsible for the Tel Aviv attack, while hailing from the Ramallah region, was deeply entrenched in the Jenin camp’s activities. It was there where he sought refuge after participating in a shooting attack with no casualties and being categorized as wanted by Israeli Security Forces in recent months. Just a day after the Tel Aviv incident, a coordinated effort by Shin Bet and the Israeli Defense Forces thwarted another terrorist cell, underscoring the persistent threats and the intricate nature of counter-terrorism operations in the area.

Although the investigation into the attack in Tel Aviv has not yet ended, it can be

established with a high degree of probability that the terrorist acted alone with the characteristics of a “lone wolf”. The best evidence of this is the will he carried on his body, seemingly for several months, in which he explicitly stated his disassociation from any terrorist organization, despite his previous affiliation with the Islamic Jihad organization. Similar to terrorists of this type, in his suicide letter, he denies all terrorist organizations and mainly emphasizes all-Islamic religious narratives. Additionally, he requested that to be buried without special ceremonies, going so far as to imply a willingness to reconcile in the afterlife with those who disregard his wishes, as conveyed both in writing and verbally. The most prominent and common principle in his will is the narrative of “martyrdom”, defining the victim as a “martyr”, a victim of the Islamic religion who is granted eternal life in heaven. This narrative, which in the past, mainly characterized terrorist operatives of the radical Islamic organizations, has become a major generator in recent years, even among terrorists who are not necessarily religious. The narrative of “martyrdom” provides terrorists, along with other Islamic narratives, a status of honor in Palestinian society, granting them benefits for their families and even a form of amnesty from their past sins.

The third key insight concerns a number of alleged failures that allowed the terrorist to reach the heart of the country. In many cases the “lone wolves” are not known to the security forces until the moment of the attack, often lacking affiliation with terrorist groups. Instead, they draw inspiration from past attacks and pervasive incitement found on social networks. Taking this fact into consideration, together with the independent planning and execution of these “lone wolves”, makes it very difficult to detect and thwart these terrorists ahead of time. However, the recent Tel Aviv attack stands apart from other attacks as the terrorist was already familiar to the security forces. He had become a person of interest for authorities after carrying out a shooting attack earlier in the year, one that fortunately caused no casualties. As mentioned, he sought refuge within the Jenin refugee camp and actively participated in its terrorist activities. His inclusion in the KML (Known Members List) of terrorist organizations targeted at the outset of Operation “Home and Garden” serves as additional proof of his high-profile status known to security forces. Surprisingly, despite this visibility, he skillfully eluded capture for an extended period, ultimately managing to enter the country armed and with malicious intentions to harm and potentially kill civilians.

The attack not only underscores an intelligence lapse but highlights an alarming security breach that, regrettably, carries grave implications. Israel’s persistent struggle with illegal crossings in the seam area is unacceptable. Shin Bet, along with other agencies, has consistently emphasized the critical need to hermetically close the security fence in Judea and Samaria over the years. Yet, concrete measures remain elusive. Rather than implementing long-term solutions, the military has often resorted to stopgap measures, such as bolstering army presence in the seam area. Such makeshift solutions are inherently fleeting and fail to address the root of the issue. The alarming ease with which terrorists bypass the separation barrier and potentially reach any corner of Israel underscores the urgency for a comprehensive and effective solution.

The analysis of the failures of the attack in Tel Aviv cannot and should not cast a shadow over the counter-terrorism achievements of the security establishment in the past year. According to Shin Bet data, since the beginning of the year, 350 shooting attacks and over 450 attacks of various types have been foiled. The success rate of the foiling is more than 85% of the attack attempts. These are huge numbers and unusual achievements by any standard. The recommendations derived from the central insights of the attack Plain and simple, mobilization is required to improve what needs to be improved, especially sealing the seam space and regulating entry into Israel through the security crossings and through permits only.